

The Wrong Way About October 23

The Air Force became a separate service in 1949, and established the Air Force Security Service (USAFSS) to do its cryptologic work. The nucleus of the USAFSS was a number of Radio Squadrons Mobile (RSM), which had done SIGINT operations for the Army Air Force in World War II.

In many ways, both the Air Force itself and the AFSS were struggling to “find themselves” in 1950, when the Korean War began in June. This made the tasks of gaining organizational efficiency and establishing best policies and practices more difficult. One problem, as reported in a quarterly report from the First Radio Squadron, Mobile (1RSM) in Japan was that the USAFSS now came under the purview of “headquarters types” who as yet had little familiarity with SIGINT work.

Captain William Fife, in his rather chatty report, cited the following incident as “comic relief.” We assume, however, that he narrated it in detail in hopes of heading off any similar events.

In October 1950 the RSM was informed that an Air Force representative at the Far East General Headquarters, we’ll call him Colonel Talon in this article, was going to visit the squadron for a few days to “learn the business.” The idea of the visit was not unwelcome to the 1RSM leadership because they had been peppered with questions from HQ that suggested the HQ staff was “looking for simple mathematical formulae which upon application would give concise readings on various phases of air activities.” Better understanding by HQ of operations would be of benefit to the operational unit.

The 1RSM suppressed its “inward shudders,” and prepared a special orientation briefing for Colonel Talon to help him understand the intricacies of SIGINT. The colonel, however, refused a “canned” presentation; he told the officers at 1RSM that he wanted to sit with the enlisted analysts and observe their work.

The unit’s leadership saw this as an opportunity to catch up on their own work, so Captain Fife took the colonel into the intercept room and introduced him to an

analyst. Colonel Talon asked the intercept operator how long he had been working on the job, and was told a year and a half. Some dialogue ensued:

COL: "How much better are you now than a year ago?"

OP: "Quite a bit better."

COL: "What percent better would you say?"

OP: "That would be hard to say."

COL: "Are you a lot better?" [emphasis as given]

OP: "Yes, I would say I am."

COL: "Well, are you just a lot better, or would you say you are a 'hell-of-a-lot' better now than a year ago?"



We don't have a photo of the 1RSM, but this was an intercept room at an Air Force unit in Japan about the time of the outbreak of the Korean War

Captain Fife intervened at this point, and began asking the colonel about his intentions. Eventually, he ascertained that the colonel, in reading the 1RSM reports, had observed that there had been a several hundred percent increase in the past year's reporting about enemy aircraft, and he was trying to ascertain whether it was an actual increase in air activity

or just operator improvement.

Fife explained to Colonel Talon that there had been a nearly 100 percent turnover of operators within the past year or so, but the best ones were always assigned to the kind of intercept the colonel was concerned about, so the level of reporting could not be attributed merely to operator improvements.

Colonel Fife discovered in a couple of days that his explanation was not acceptable. A request arrived from headquarters asking for a mathematical formula to account for intercept volume that would take into account operator

efficiency, improved intercept techniques, changes in equipment, and changes in atmospherics.

There is no indication whether or not the 1RSM was able to deliver the requested formula.

SOURCE: the report by the First Radio Squadron, Mobile for October through December 1950.

502 caption: a wood-paneled room with four desks; radios are on the desks, and four men sit behind them listening.